RED SKY THINKING

CONTENT THAT CUTS THROUGH

A Modern Guide to Writing Copy for the Chronically Distracted

RED havas

Author:

ELLEN MALLERNEE BARNES

Vice President of Content, Red Havas

If you'd like advice for cutting through obstacles like cynicism and chronic distraction with nunchuck-like writing skills, you're in the right place. But first, we need to tell you what you're up against when you sit down to write copy you'd like other people to read.

Attention spans are at risk of extinction. When content does manage to mosey its way into our consciousness, we're suspicious of it. In its 12th year, Havas Group's **Meaningful Brands** study surveyed 395,000+ people around the world to find out what makes a brand meaningful. As it turns out, most of us don't believe what brands say to us.

Only 47% of brands are seen as trustworthy, which is why marketers have heard so much about authenticity, transparency and corporate soul searching lately — making sure what you say matches what you do.

Some of the winning writing techniques shared within this paper date back decades and remain relevant. Others specifically address what it's like to live in an information age, where there's both an art and a science to writing marketing copy.

Gretchen McCulloch, author of "Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language," thinks of language as a moving target:

"It's a living thing that exists in the minds of living beings. Nothing about human life or human society or human culture is exactly the same from one generation to the next, and language just comes along as part of that."

Writing and storytelling are two of the most powerful ways to put ideas into the world. For marketers, both skills can be superpowers, especially as written communication skills decay around us.

1

HELP WANTED: WRITERS APPLY WITHIN

Employees spend 19.93 hours on written communication each week — nearly half of a 40-hour workweek, according to Grammarly and Harris Poll **research**. The study also estimates up to a $1.2 trillion annual loss among businesses due to ineffective communication.

Where's the breakdown happening? Senka Hadzimuratovic, Grammarly's head of communications, told us it can be difficult to know if we've come across as intended in our writing. Especially in the hybrid workplace, where we're doing more written work and communicating with colleagues in new ways.

She said: "Given these shifts, people are realizing how vital written communication is in the workplace. Those who can communicate effectively will have a competitive advantage. Professionals are not only expected to nail the basics of spelling and grammar, but they also need to be clear, concise and tone-appropriate to ensure their message lands."

As communicators, we have a duty to write in a way that speaks to our intended audience. Whether or not you identify as a professional writer, you're speaking volumes every time you write an email to a client, post something on LinkedIn or draft a message to a colleague.

Besides being one of the most desired skill sets across professions, writing is something brands more often than not have to hire someone outside their company to do. More than **80%** of companies have outsourced writing — making it the most commonly outsourced form of content.

Imagine what a rare and precious bird you would be if your writing skills allowed your employer to manage this task in house.

Oh, and this too: Unlike many other professions, writers are not at risk of being replaced by robots. Sure, AI writing apps exist. But writing with heart is one thing that a robot will never master. AI-generated content also happens to be against **Google's Webmaster Guidelines** — take that, R2-D2.

If you are trying to decide among a few people to fill a position, hire the best writer … That's because being a good writer is about more than clear writing. Clear writing is a sign of clear thinking. Great writers know how to communicate. They make things easy to understand. They can put themselves in someone else's shoes. They know what to omit. And those are qualities you want in any candidate."

– Jason Fried, Basecamp CEO, as published in **"Rework"**

2

BUILDING TRUST ONE SENTENCE AT A TIME

The good news, according to Meaningful Brands, is that consumers are actively seeking more personal and collective benefits from brands. Compared to pre-COVID times, demand for "helpful" content is on the rise.

This represents an enormous opportunity to be intentional about how you write to your target audience, what kind of content you give them and how you serve it up.

If writing in a way that engenders the trust of your reader doesn't come naturally to you, you're like most people. However, most of us innately know how we want to be talked to or treated by brands. We sense when a sentence reeks of bloated promises or when it's from the heart.

Good writing requires much more of us than we'd like to believe.

Integrity is one of these things; you must be a hungry researcher who would sooner perish than cite a flimsy statistic.

Plagiarism should make you panic-stricken. (Hot tip: Free plagiarism tools like **this one from Grammarly** are there to keep you honest.)

You must also be willing to spend time deep in observation, digesting your research before launching into your work.

In "The Adweek Copywriting Handbook," direct marketing guru Joe Sugarman tells of spending three days researching a watch before determining he'd focus his copy on its laser technology. The resulting ad, he said, led to millions of dollars in sales.

If you write for a living, let's add SEO savvy and social media literacy to your list of must-have skills. Bonus points if you have the ability to remain open to unexpected outcomes, whether they arrive in the form of line edits or directions your research takes you.

And finally, you must be a shrewd editor of your own work. As Stephen King said, "To write is human, and to edit is divine."

Having a style bible helps. Whether it's the "Associated Press Stylebook," "Chicago Manual of Style," the "Oxford Style Manual," the "Australian Style Guide" or an in-house style guide of your own creation, make sure you know how you'll be handling everything from serial commas to professional titles, and handle them the same way, every single time.

That sense of contributing to a community is never more rewarding than when you discover something that you believe can improve your readers' lives by changing what and how they think."

– Wayne C. Booth, author of **"The Craft of Research"**

3

GETTING INTO THE WRITE MINDSET

Some of the most legendary writing advice has this in common: It encourages us to kick our inner critic out and invite in playfulness, pleasure and rebellion.

One common misconception? That a good writer should be a quick writer. More often than not, writing takes heaps of time. Pushing words around a page can be incredibly tedious.

In his 1903 novella, "Tristan," Thomas Mann famously observed this of his main character, "His words did not come in a rush; they came with such pathetic slowness, considering the man was a writer by trade, you would have drawn the conclusion, watching him, that a writer is one to whom writing comes harder than to anybody else."

You've probably heard that Hemingway advised writing drunk and editing sober.

He didn't actually say that. It was editor and novelist Peter De Vries who said something along those lines. (**Bartleby.com** is a great source for writers who want to ensure they're quoting the right person, as too often we end up quoting, say, Oprah, when really we should be quoting Gandhi.) What De Vries said was, "Sometimes I write drunk and revise sober, and sometimes I write sober and revise drunk. But you have to have both elements in creation — the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline."

Something Hemingway did say: "The first draft of anything is shit."

The distinction between the writer self and the editor self has been described in many ways by many authors. While alcohol intoxication isn't necessary to relax the grip of self-doubt, there's good reason to throw caution to the wind when you write your first draft.

As Lady Gaga **put it**, "When you make music or write or create, it's really your job to have mind-blowing, irresponsible, condomless sex with whatever idea it is you're writing about at the time."

When Scott Dikkers, a comedy writer and founder of The Onion, was stricken with writer's block, he overcame it by identifying within him a "clown brain" and an "editor's brain."

When he let the clown take a turn at the wheel before the editor, his "block" vanished.

"Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a shitty first draft."

—Anne Lamott, "Bird by Bird"

Here's how **Dikkers described it** to Eddie Shleyner over at **VeryGoodCopy.com**:

"The clown is the part of the brain that just writes and writes and writes and doesn't make any judgment about how terrible the writing is. The clown is like a child. It's somebody who says whatever they're thinking. They don't edit before it comes out. They just blurt it out — and sometimes it's wildly inappropriate and stupid … but they think it's hilarious."

On the other hand, said Dikkers, "The editor is the part of the brain that later sifts through all the garbage and tries to find the diamond in the rough. At his worst, the editor is the part of the brain that a writer starts with and, therefore, can't get any writing done because every thought is edited before it's even put on paper. Every thought is judged and, invariably, stamped 'not good enough.' And so the writer never writes anything.

"The editor is much more common. Most people, as they grow up, learn to suppress the clown side of their brain because they want to be seen as adults. They want to be appropriate. They don't want to say stupid stuff; they don't want to feel embarrassed. And so they start clamming up, both in life and on the page. When they sit down and try to write something, they find that the clown's muscles have atrophied while the editor's muscles have overwhelmed their system.

"The editor is judgmental, critical. He says, 'Oh, that's not good; that's not appropriate; that isn't working,' and so on. Of course, saying that about other people's writing when you're an editor is your job. But saying that about your own writing, when you're just writing first drafts, is death."

"Don't sabotage yourself with seriousness. Try to keep some essential perspective: You are not performing an emergency tracheotomy. You are not deciding whether or not to drop the Bomb. You are putting lines of print on a page. … If you're enjoying yourself when you put those lines down, you have a better chance of your readers enjoying you."

—Elizabeth Berg, author

Writing instructor Brenda Ueland encouraged a playful style of writing she called "moodling," which she described as "long, inefficient happy idling, dawdling and puttering."

"You should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountain top, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten — happy, absorbed and quietly putting one bead on after another," she said.

In the event that you've brought your ego along with you to a writing task, you must immediately send it packing.

Instead, be curious as a child, humble as a beginner.

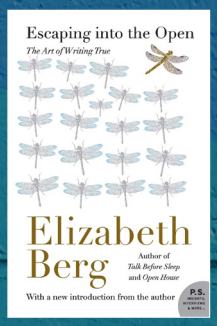
Ask all the questions. Assume you won't know the answers. Be so grateful to learn them.

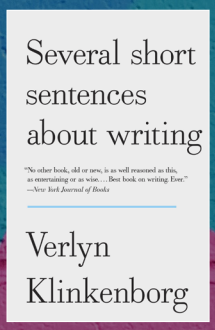
"If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of 'The Elements of Style.' The first greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they're happy."

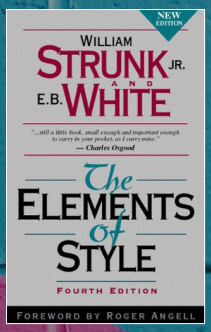
—Dorothy Parker

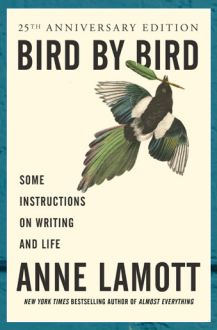
Required reading on writing

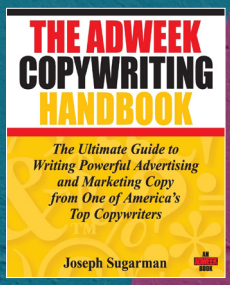
Reading about writing?
Dare you to do it without getting crazy inspired.

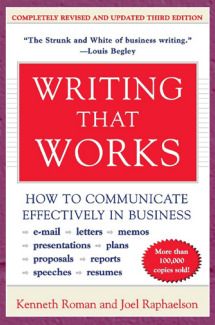


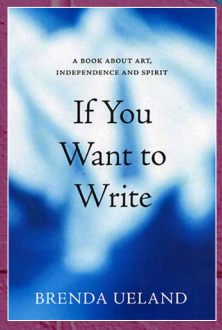


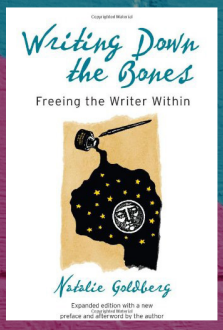


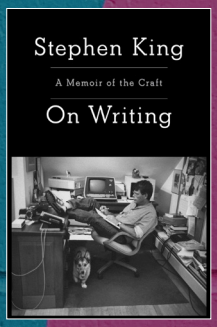


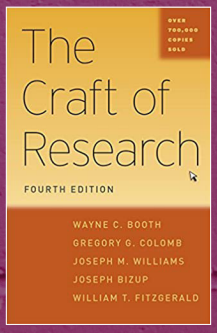


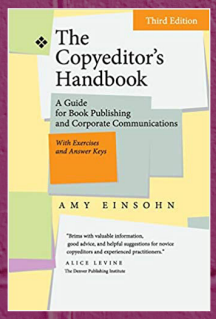


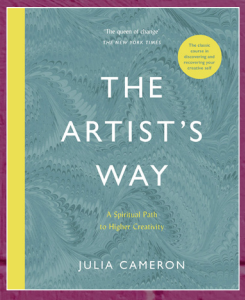


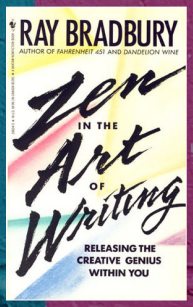


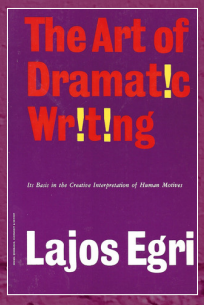


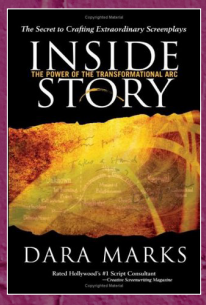


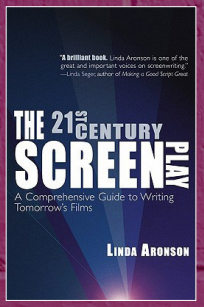












4

SOME WAYS WITH WORDS: 10 COPYWRITING FUNDAMENTALS

1. Heed the advice of your direct response forebearers.

We have plenty to learn from the Mad Men-era copywriters like Joe Sugarman, who famously sold a used airplane valued at $190,000 for $240,000 through a single magazine ad.

Sugarman identified 24 psychological triggers that can be used to inspire people to make a purchase — things like greed, guilt, hope, honesty, curiosity, specificity and the desire to belong.

Bob Stone had an entire formula for ordering the information in his marketing copy (see sidebar).

And in 1982 David Ogilvy sent this internal memo to everyone at his advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather. Its title: "How to Write."

The better you write, the higher you go in Ogilvy & Mather. People who think well, write well. Woolly minded people write woolly memos, woolly letters and woolly speeches.

Good writing is not a natural gift. You have to learn to write well. Here are 10 hints:

1. *Read the **Roman-Raphaelson book on writing**. Read it three times.*
2. *Write the way you talk. Naturally.*
3. *Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.*
4. *Never use jargon words like reconceptualize, demassification, attitudinally, judgmentally. They are hallmarks of a pretentious ass.*
5. *Never write more than two pages on any subject.*
6. *Check your quotations.*
7. *Never send a letter or a memo on the day you write it. Read it aloud the next morning — and then edit it.*
8. *If it is something important, get a colleague to improve it.*
9. *Before you send your letter or your memo, make sure it is crystal clear what you want the recipient to do.*
10. *If you want ACTION, don't write. Go and tell the guy what you want.*

These men specialized in direct response marketing, which applies human psychology to the written word.

The copywriting formula of direct marketing pioneer Bob Stone

1. **Benefit:** Begin with your strongest benefit — either in the headline or first paragraph.
2. **Develop:** Expand on the most important benefit.
3. **Receive:** Tell the reader specifically what he will get, using all details, features, and benefits.
4. **Prove:** Demonstrate how those benefits are true and valuable by providing proof, facts, evidence and endorsement.
5. **Lose:** Tell the reader what he will lose and what benefits he'll miss out on if he doesn't act.
6. **Recap:** Sum up the most important benefits.
7. **Act:** Give a call to action: Tell the reader to respond immediately and give him a good, logical reason why they should. Show how the benefits will kick in.

Sugarman wrote about creating a "slippery slope" with your writing — with the goal being to focus on leading your reader from your headline into your first sentence, and from your first sentence into your second sentence, and so on.

And Ogilvy, whose long-form ads were the stuff of legend in the '60s, was once asked why he recommends long copy when so few people read past the headline.

He replied:

"If you aren't in the market for a product, you are unlikely to read an advertisement for it, no matter how long or short the copy … Real prospects — especially prospects responsible for spending large sums — are hungry for information. You might be able to sell a candy bar with very short copy. But you could never make a case for buying a Cessna Citation in a handful of words."

2. Learn how to write a killer headline.

Some headlines are so legendary that people are still marveling about them decades later.

Case in point, direct response copywriter John Carlton's famous headline: "Amazing Secret Discovered By One-Legged Golfer Adds 50 Yards to Your Drives, Eliminates Hooks and Slices... and Can Slash Up to 10 Strokes From Your Game Almost Overnight."

This headline works so well because it adheres to not just one but two of Carlton's headline-writing best practices.

First, it's a contrast story headline. It teases that you're about to read an interesting story. And it has a contrasting element (a one-legged golfer!), which creates an element of surprise.

"How I _____ without _____" is one such template for a contrast story headline.

Within this framework, you might write either of these made-to-intrigue headlines:

"How I learned to ski without snow" or "How Florida man learned to ski without snow."

These types of headlines generally work better than a how-to headline like "How to ski without snow" because they indicate that the reader themself will not have to do any work. As in, they will not have to learn to ski without snow.

Eugene Schwartz, author of the book "Breakthrough Advertising," advised using headlines to voice a common resentment. One such headline he wrote: "Why Haven't TV Owners Been Told These Facts."

Remember, don't write a check with your headline that your article can't cash (aka "clickbait.") You'll only piss people off.

3. Write short sentences and short paragraphs.

Verlyn Klinkenborg's **"Several Short Sentences About Writing"** makes a strong case for writing simple sentences and short paragraphs (try for three lines max). Often, he'd even make a hard return after each sentence, giving it room to breathe.

Klinkenborg said:

"You can say smart, interesting, complicated things using short sentences. How long is a good idea? Does it become less good if it's expressed in two sentences instead of one?"

Writing short sentences may feel weird at first, he warned. "But they carry you back to a prose you can control. They help eliminate transitions. They make ambiguity less likely and easier to detect."

While many of us believe that writing longer sentences will make us sound smarter or more sophisticated, we should remember that people don't particularly want to read writing that sounds grown-up or authoritative.

Rather, write as if you're talking with a friend. Good prose often sounds spoken, which isn't the same thing as colloquial.

By writing short sentences, you're also increasing the readability of your content for online settings. The intricacies of SEO are many, but one thing's certain: The internet is more likely to be happy with you and what you've written if you make it easy reading.

> **"Sometimes, the best copy to sell a horse is 'Horse for Sale.'"**
>
> —Jay Abraham, founder and CEO of the Abraham Group

4. Make it about the reader, not about you.

"Remember that the people you address are selfish, as we all are," said Claude Hopkins, a copywriting legend who once wrote a direct mail advertisement for evaporated milk that brought in 1.46 million coupons. "They care nothing about your interest or your profit. Ads say in effect, 'Buy my brand. Give me the trade you give to others. Let me have the money.'"

In his 1923 classic "Scientific Advertising," Hopkins may as well have been talking about readers today when he said, "People will not be bored in print. They may listen politely at a dinner table to boasts and personalities, life history, etc. But in print they choose their own companions, their own subjects. They want to be amused or benefited. They want economy, beauty, labor savings, good things to eat and wear."

As a writer, your own stories are only as good as your reader's ability to relate to them or to take inspiration from them.

"The best writing serves the reader — not the writer," said Ann Handley, author of "Everybody Writes."

"Our job as writers is to make more sense of the world, to paraphrase Anne Lamott and E.B. White and a million other writers.

"So even when you're writing about your own life and your own experiences from your own point of view, you're nonetheless exposing something real and true and universal.

"Make each sentence (and every word in that sentence) earn its keep: Is this sentence indulgent? Or does it help the reader? Does it explain, elucidate or elevate the truth?

"Get out of your head and into your reader's."

5. Write for inclusivity.

Whereas we once may have described a person in terms of their race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability or economic status, we're now challenged not to.

Individual awareness is the first step. For word nerds (technical term: "lexophiles"), the learning curve that comes with understanding the nuances of inclusive language can be a fascinating one.

We also have resources now that help us neutralize or disarm the way we write about people. **Textio.com** can comb your copy for biased phrases, even flagging things like sports references that may not translate beyond your own region.

And across the world, editorial style guides, professional associations, universities and government agencies are institutionalizing significant linguistic shifts. The United Nations, the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization, the European Parliament and the European Commission all have adopted guidelines for gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language.

The consensus: It's important to ensure that what we write, whether to employees, clients or the general public, is inclusive, accessible and doesn't leave out groups of people by using terms that are unfamiliar or don't apply to them.

Beyond honoring a person's preferred pronouns, neutralize language wherever possible. For example, replace "chairman" with "chair" or "chairperson," "policeman" or "policewoman" with "police officer." It's also a good idea to use "partner or "in a relationship" rather than "wife" or "husband."

Even our choices about punctuation and capitalization can imply inclusion. The AP dropped the hyphen from dual-heritage terms such as African American and Asian American, and now capitalizes Black in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense. (It continues to lowercase the term white in racial, ethnic and cultural senses, as explained **here**.)

We're also being called to rethink things we once may have called crazy, psycho, lame or moronic. Disability justice advocate Lydia X. Z. Brown has developed a **full list** of ableist language to avoid and suggested what we might say instead.

6. Find the humor.

Humor can be an excellent way of earning a reader's trust. Life is absurd; calling attention to that can disarm cynicism.

It also requires some extra vulnerability on the writer's part: Is the idea actually funny? Is it too weird? It's a risk we have to take.

Rosie May Bird Smith, the Havas London writer behind Durex's clever "Uncomfortable Truth" campaign, promoted Durex's Naturals lube range with a 60-second spot reminding us that sex isn't always like what we see on screen. Another of her campaigns, for carpet cleaner brand Vanish, increased sales by 81% by imagining a family with "carpetphobia."

Bird Smith fears "funny" may be a dying breed if we don't advocate for it. "Funny scripts only get made if you present them to clients," she said. "And that's where we're going wrong as an industry. We're making the assumption that 'funny just isn't their tone of voice,' and so are censoring out the absurdity before it even gets to them. On the rare occasion that a funny script manages to make it to the client, you often find that they're bang up for something other than a rhyming manifesto ad."

That said, don't get too carried away trying to be clever. Be sure you come by every laugh honestly. As Dorothy Parker said, "There's a hell of a distance between wisecracking and wit. Wit has truth in it; wisecracking is simply calisthenics with words."

7. Leave in the details.

Tell a story that's too broad, and you'll more than likely lose your reader. Instead, locate and hone in on the key moments that might be relatable for a reader.

Details are what will make a brand story memorable and draw people in so they feel involved in the story that's unfolding.

But what kind of details? How do we know where to elaborate and where to use restraint?

Rob Biesenbach, author of "Unleash the Power of Storytelling," said the turning points of a story deserve our most careful attention:

"In your stories, look for those 'aha' moments: a sudden revelation or discovery or surprise or change. Paint a picture for us. Add a few sensory details. What was the setting? (A big job interview?) The environment? (A stuffy, windowless conference room?) How did it feel? (A bead of sweat running down the back?)

"Slowing down and going deep at those moments signals to your audience that something important is happening that demands their attention."

Sound reminiscent of the "show, don't tell" writing guidance you've likely received at some point or another?

It's classic advice for a reason. Don't tell your reader how someone feels, or should feel. Rather, engage their senses with thoughtful details that show what's happening. This honors their ability to put two and two together, and it allows the picture to develop more fully in their mind.

8. Win trust with conditional messaging.

If you're making a claim that sounds too good to be true, your reader will probably assume it is. This is where conditional messaging can save the day.

We can explain.

In 1974, copywriters Gary Bencivenga and Dan Rosenthal were quibbling over a headline they'd written for a client that sold silver coins.

That headline read: "Two reasons why the price of silver may rise steeply."

Rosenthal argued that they should change it to "Two reasons why the price of silver will rise steeply."

That way, they'd sound more assured of what they were saying, he told Bencivenga.

They ended up testing both headlines and finding that the one with conditional language — "may rise" outperformed by 200% the one that sounded more certain — "will rise."

Eddie Schylener, who relayed this story on his site VeryGoodCopy, said, "If you can sandwich your claim inside an IF… THEN statement, it will instantly make it more believable."

It sounds counterintuitive, but by letting your reader know that your promise or claim isn't 100% bulletproof, you earn more of their trust.

Bencivenga described this as "snoozing the reader's 'Yeah, sure…' alarm."

9. Sleep on it. Then get to editing.

If possible, write, and then give your work a nice long rest before you return to edit. The time and space will allow you to see it clearly — where there are bits of magic, where there's pomposity, what must stay and what must go.

Further, reading your work aloud can alert you to places where there may be issues with clarity, clunkiness and rhythm. And of course, you will be sure to fact check and spellcheck your work.

Another tactic, although old school, is to print your writing and digest it that way.

Here's what Joan Didion had to say on the matter of revising, which brings us back also to the matter of alcohol:

"When I finish work at the end of the day, I go over the pages, the page that I've done that day, and I mark it up and leave it until the morning. Then I make the corrections in the morning, which gives me a way to start the day ... I can have a drink at night. And the drink loosens me up enough to actually mark it up, you know. Really, I have found the drink actually helps."

10. Optimize your writing for online publication.

Beyond learning to write in a compelling way, there's the issue of getting your writing to stand out amongst a glut of online content. WordPress.com bloggers alone create 70 million new blog posts per month, while Tumblr is home to 548 million blogs.

Not only are you competing for readers, but for the attention of search engines. So familiarize yourself with the importance of keywords. Use Ahrefs, SEMrush Magic Keyword Tool or Neil Patel's Ubersuggest Google Chrome extension to find out which keywords have the highest monthly search volume.

At the bare minimum, consider if your content answers questions that your target audience often asks.

And remember that a variety of readability plugins and extensions exist to help you whip a piece of writing into a lean, mean readable machine. They rely on algorithms such as the Gunning-Fog index, Coleman-Liau index and SMOG index.

Perhaps the most famous of these are the Flesch-Kincaid readability tests, developed in the 1940s by Rudolf Flesch, a consultant with the Associated Press. A big proponent of plain English, Flesch was working to improve the readability of newspapers. He went on to write the bestseller "Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It."

Now, his Flesch Reading Ease Score is used by professionals of all stripes. Scoring copy between 1 and 100, the formula is based on two factors: sentence length and word length. The higher the score, the easier it is to read.

And there we have it once more: By keeping it simple and crisp, our content is more likely to be devoured.

According to Havas Group research, almost half of the content created by the world's leading 1,500 brands is only clutter, having little impact on consumers' lives or business results.

The right content, however, in the right context, can make the most meaningful connections.

Connection is what we're all here for — in our work and on planet earth — so let's say what we mean, mean what we say, and write like we mean it.

JAMES WRIGHT
GLOBAL CEO, RED HAVAS & GLOBAL CHAIRMAN,
HAVAS PR GLOBAL COLLECTIVE
RED HAVAS
M: +1-917-520-7666
E: JAMES.WRIGHT@REDHAVAS.COM
A: 200 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NY 10016

Red Havas is part of the Havas PR Global Collective, the PR and communications arm of the Havas Group that comprises approximately 40 agencies around the world and more than 1,300 employees. The Red Havas strategic “Merged Media” model brings together traditional and digital publishing, content, social media and data within a single infrastructure.

For further information, please visit **www.redhavas.com**.